

Critical Literacy, the Future of English and the Work of Mourning

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ABSTRACT

In this article I use the occasion of farewelling my Year 12 students at the end of their schooling, some intertextual references to *Hamlet*, and some conceptual frames of Derrida, to reflect dialogically on the role of critical literacy in Australian English curricula in the past, the present and into the future.

'YOU DON'T HAVE TO BELIEVE IN GHOSTS TO BE AFFECTED BY THEM.' (LUCY, 2004, P. 111)

Stay, illusion!

As I write, I am in mourning. I have just farewelled my Year 12 students as they left school to begin their 'stuvac' (study vacation) in preparation for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination. The last lessons with a Year 12 class are always disconcerting. I have found these lessons to have a sense of desperation about them, as they are characteristically both frantic and sorrowful. The pressure of getting through the final parts of the course invariably demands a final sprint to the finish of what has become a gruelling marathon. At this time I find myself thinking back and asking whether I have done everything I possibly could to best prepare my students for their exam. However, the end of thirteen years of schooling is finally in sight for my students, and this brings a sense of excitement, anticipation and relief. The desperation to finish is tempered by a collective impulse to stop, take a breath and think back on all that we have been through together. Lessons go off on a tangent as we look to find paths into the retelling of anecdotes that will allow us to laugh at ourselves. Somehow a tacit agreement has been reached that this is an appropriate way of acknowledging we share a bond with a fast-approaching expiry date. There's an unstated need to pay our respects to this bond and to celebrate it in some way. We are, it might be said, looking to hold a wake even before the end has been reached.

The final days with an HSC class is a curious time. It is, recalling *Hamlet* via Derrida (1994), a time that is 'out of joint'¹, or not readily comprehensible within the conventional delineation of past, present and future.

As Derrida (1994; cf. Lucy, 1997, pp. 144–148) reads *Hamlet*, it is the appearance of the ghost that unhinges time. The comings and goings of the ghost call into question our understanding of the present, and all that is associated with this, precisely because a spectre does not exist in time in the way that we conventionally understand it. Derrida (1994) describes the entries and exits made by the ghost in *Hamlet* as 'A question of repetition: a spectre is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*' (p. 11). In other words, a ghost exists both inside *and* outside of conventional time.

The past few weeks with my Year 12 students was indeed a disjointed time – a time of repetition, the very possibility of which necessarily made everything different (cf. Derrida, 1988).² In our thoughts and actions we moved between the present and our memories of a time that once was, all the while anticipating a final parting. The notion of memory points in turn to a shadowy presence in all that we said and did in our last hours. This is the question of what it is exactly that we have been bequeathed by our time together. As we mourned the end of this time, we were also contemplating what we will be left with, including that which we will inherit from each other. When Derrida (1994, p. 67) suggests that all inheritors are in mourning, I think I know what he means. As I have hinted at above, my students and I had been tentatively edging around the matter of how we could best speak of all that we had experienced together. We struggled to find language and gestures by which we might pay appropriate homage to our shared past.

Derrida (1994) also suggests that the return to the present of the past, in the form of a ghost, leaves us with the question of what to do into the future: 'Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task' (p. 67). In his reading of *Hamlet*, Derrida argues that the task which lies ahead for Hamlet, his inheritance, is to determine how to *be* (or not to be). Derrida sees this inheritance as fundamental for each of us in our particular comings and goings.

The relevance of the Derridean ideas of inheritance and mourning to my professional life was brought home to me in a humbling and moving way a few weeks ago when a group of my Year 12 students presented me with a t-shirt of their own design. I have since come to believe that the t-shirt signifies something more than 'thank you'. I see it as a statement about our shared past, what this past has bequeathed us and how it should carry over into the future. Through this gift, a renegotiation of the teacher-student relationship took place.

On the front of the t-shirt is a slogan which reads 'Bakhtin to the (Past, Present and) Future.' The slogan takes the form of a visual parody of the logo for the film *Back to the Future*. The visual punning acknowledges, at the very least, a shared language and understanding in the relationship we had enjoyed to that moment. But it also marks a consequent change in that relationship. There was a new found maturity in my students' playful determination to have *another* word with me, and not leave my closing words of our final lesson as *the* end of

things. (Bakhtin, of course, reminds us that there is always the possibility of one more response.³) Having given me the t-shirt the day after our final lesson, my students took a digital photograph of me wearing it and mugging for the camera. Of course, these actions – the giving of the gift and the taking of the photograph – make possible another response in a different context. It is this task I am now undertaking: a case of repetition-with-difference, you might say, that aspires to make a *difference*. To put it another way, I see this anecdote as problematising the status being accorded to curriculum philosophising in the abstract, at the expense of the practical knowledge of teachers, in discussions around the subject's future. I shall return to this point below.

As I see it, my students' gift pays homage to the way we had explored Bakhtin's thinking on language, particularly its dialogic nature, in an elective I had taught them. Those familiar with Rob Pope's work (2002) would recognise the t-shirt I was given as a textual intervention, highlighting the critical-creative possibilities of what he calls, following Bakhtin, 'response-ability' (p. 156). Intertextuality is brought into action by my students in a humorous way. More significantly, the t-shirt also refers back to my teaching and Bakhtin's thinking for subversive ends. The photograph of me wearing the t-shirt introduces an element of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984), as the students' intense, even intimidating teacher (such is the gist of postings at *rate-myteachers.com*) is now and forever captured in the role of a clown. Whatever persona I had adopted in class was disrupted and decentred – a 'gap' created within it that allowed the performance of another me and the consequent inversion of familiar power structures. So the dialogue between us, and between us and the thinking of Bakhtin, was continued beyond the bell that signalled an end to our last lesson and the physical space that was our classroom. The students could now walk away knowing they had fundamentally altered their relationship with me, and that they had irrevocably changed the way I would remember them. As I became complicit in *their* joke, this put us on a more democratic footing. With the photograph, they created their own image (material and metaphoric) of *us*; one which they can take into the future as the way they remember English. Such is the dialogic power of this *affirmative* act of resistance, which I certainly recognise as a form of critical literacy: it has (re)shaped my memories and my sense of self, as these words attest. Their gift has changed *me* because it changed *us*.

As a form of individual and public expression of

meaning, I interpret my students' gift as acknowledging at once their interest in what we have studied, their respect for me as their teacher and their determination to be independent, creative thinkers. I also see it as expressing their acceptance of the weakening of the disciplinary boundaries of English. My students are evidently not fazed by critical theory. They have moved easily between English as the study of literature and a version of English which is more orientated towards the study of language and rhetoric. The t-shirt indicates that they see value in popular culture for the way in which it can, just like high culture, function to create shared understandings of significant aspects of our world and lives, as well as a sense of community. They also clearly recognise reception and creation as being interdependent, a key understanding underpinning the study of English in NSW⁴ and one which makes problematic a too ready distinction between *knowledge* and *process* (see, for example, National Curriculum Board, 2008, p. 7) in determining an *English* curriculum.

Such are the relationships I have enjoyed with these students, and the signifying power of their gift of the t-shirt, that I feel they will be with me in spirit for many years to come, always present in my thinking. I believe it is of great consequence that this feeling should be with me as I contemplate and respond to the development of the national English curriculum – beyond my teaching, the most urgent professional responsibility I face at the present time. After all, what a national curriculum has to offer future students is of vital significance. The ghostly presence of my 'past' students, their haunting of me, makes me alert to the presence, in this process of developing a national curriculum, of other ghosts and other forms of haunting. My past students have taught me that ghosts are real and they have an *effect* that goes well beyond the wearing of a t-shirt. It is from this angle that I will now consider some of the rhetoric through which particular visions of a future English are being pursued in the here and now, before going on to consider the ways in which the actions of my students provide a commentary on these possible futures.

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark

The dilemma for Hamlet, 'To be, or not to be ...', is brought about, which is to say *preceded*, by the appearance of a ghost. Contemplating this idea in the context of the move towards a national curriculum, which, after all, requires consideration of what English *can* and

cannot be, has left me feeling as if I am currently working in a time that is particularly unhinged or disjointed. An audacious revisionism with regards to the subject's history is now being pursued as we consider its future.⁵ You might say, if you believed in ghosts, that a particular spectre currently looms very large in the realm of English. This is critical literacy, which has been widely characterised as *the* current orthodoxy in contemporary English teaching. The voices of teachers working with critical literacy, not to mention their students, have been marginalised and silenced in much of the criticism being made of it. Teachers, and the *reality* of the work they have done in the past, the sort of work my students have paid tribute to with their t-shirt, seemingly count for very little.⁶ More to the point, it is as if this work has *never even* been undertaken – its very existence denied by being passed over in silence. For this reason, there appears to be no getting away from the fact that critical literacy is a ghost which makes possible much current commentary about what a future English in this country might or might not be,⁷ including my own efforts here.

The present haunting of English is encapsulated in remarks by Graham Turner, director of the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland. In expressing his opposition to the National Curriculum Board's appointment of Peter Freebody to write a framing paper for English, primarily on the grounds that Freebody is not an English literature specialist but has a research interest in critical literacy, Turner was quoted (Ferrari, 2008) as saying that 'criticism [of critical literacy] mounted over the past few years from both the Left and the Right will be ignored and we'll simply return to what we've had over the past 10 years, which is not good enough'.⁸

Turner's position warrants attention as we move towards a national curriculum. The question of the future of English will inevitably carry traces of the contestation of recent years, despite the adept and confident ways students can, as I have described above, move between different understandings of the subject. Slattery (2008a), a prominent media critic of critical literacy (see Lucy & Mickler, 2006), takes his lead from the sort of views expressed by Turner when he writes that criticism of critical literacy by prominent academics means 'it's suddenly possible to talk about humanistic values and aesthetic pleasures without risking ideological sanction, charges of 'privileging' the canon, or retrograde foggyish conservatism.'

In this way, our 'disjointed now' (Derrida, 1994, p.

1) is characterised by the common ground that conservatives (e.g. Donnelly, 2006) and self-proclaimed progressives (e.g. Turner and Slattery) are finding with regard to the corrupted (and corrupting) presence of critical literacy in English. Traditional oppositions within educational debates cease to mean very much when the spectre of critical literacy is invoked. In their shared concern about critical literacy, prominent media commentators and academics are now united against a common foe – one against which they can define and assert the reasonableness of their institutional, disciplinary and pedagogical interests at a time when the future of English is up for grabs. A significant element of commonality across the progressive / conservative and media / academy divides is the mourning of what was *before* the ‘explosion of ‘theory’ that happened in the 1980s and 1990s’ (Misson and Morgan, 2006, p. xii) helped give rise to critical literacy. This development, it should be remembered, occurred when the discipline of English was understood to have been ‘falling apart for some time’ (Frow, 1990, p. 359). The ‘crisis’ in the discipline of English, which some see as still being evident today, clearly preceded the rise of critical literacy to whatever level of influence it now enjoys.

The spectral notion of the ‘golden age’ of pre-critical literacy English brings me back to Derrida’s notions of inheritance and mourning. Derrida (2001, p. 77) emphasises the freedoms and agency that are integral to the work that memory and inheritance demand of us:

When we inherit, we don’t simply passively receive something. We choose, we select, we reaffirm. So at the heart of the experience of inheritance you have a decision to reaffirm, to select, to filter and to interpret. There is no inheritance without some interpretation and some choice, which means that you never inherit passively everything which is given to you. You make a decision to be true to the past and to choose and interpret, and so there is initiative.

As we contemplate the future of English in this country, we should consider the interpretations and choices being made in the (re)evaluating of its past, and the ends to which these are being put. A particular point of focus must be the consequences of these interpretations and choices for teachers. Specific consideration needs to be given to the extent to which visions of a future English promote or limit teacher autonomy. This is a point the NCB itself acknowledges. In a key discussion paper it has stressed that the capacity of teachers to freely exercise professional judgement and a significant degree of autonomy is crucial to the national

curriculum, if it is to meet the diverse needs of students: ‘The curriculum should allow jurisdictions, systems and schools to implement it in a way that values teachers’ professional knowledge and reflects local contexts (National Curriculum Board, 2008, p. 4).

Accordingly, it is through the notions of spectrality, inheritance and mourning that I return to the recent work of Misson and Morgan (2006), who notably provide a ‘defence’ of critical literacy which starts at the very point that those who wish to see critical literacy expunged from the English curriculum also begin: namely, with the idea that there are areas of English that critical literacy, as ‘currently constituted’, cannot ‘deal with adequately’ (p. ix). Misson and Morgan have, in their own ways, greatly influenced the thinking and practice of many English teachers in this country, myself included. And it is precisely because of their influence, my inheritance from them, that I am compelled to reconsider their work in light of current developments at a national level. The impetus here is the way that their version of the recent history of English, particularly their advocacy of the aesthetic turn (Sawyer, 2006), challenges me to rethink my practice. As has been seen, Slattery has identified the aesthetic turn as making it possible to *once again*, in the context of the development of the national curriculum, speak of and understand English in a very traditional way. This is, of course, not to suggest that this is an outcome Misson and Morgan would see as desirable. In fact, the opposite is true, given that they make a case for poststructuralism and the ‘saving’ (p. 221) of critical literacy. It is, however, a consequence that they have helped bring about, no matter how unwittingly, and one to which Australian teachers are now being publicly called upon by prominent academics and commentators to respond.

I now understand Misson and Morgan’s book as a defence of critical literacy that leaves those of us who have been influenced by their past work in an unreasonable position. My motivation in stating this, I must stress, is a desire to continue to think about and discuss the possibilities of being and non-being for the English subjects.⁹ It is, in other words, to read and respond to Misson and Morgan on their own (poststructuralist) terms, given the emphasis they place in their book (Misson and Morgan, 2006, p. 225) on the English subjects remaining open to difference.

Each of us reads individually..., out of our own experience, and it is the range of readings that can make an English classroom one of the most exciting places to be, not simply to celebrate diversity, but to understand

what generates diversity, and for each person to refine her or his own views through interaction with those of others.

Part of my response to their suggestions as to the responsibilities of English teachers is to ask a question of my own. What, if any, responsibilities do Misson and Morgan, as curriculum theorists, have to the past and to their readers, particularly those teachers who have taken their previous writings about poststructuralism and critical literacy seriously enough to subsequently re-evaluate their classroom practice? Given their assumption that 'a critical literacy model [of English] is not the current norm in English teaching' (p. xii), a claim that contradicts the opinion of the more shrill opponents of critical literacy, it would seem fair to assume that Misson and Morgan envisaged that teachers familiar with their past work would likely form a significant percentage of their readership. If not, and citing the sub-title of their book, in whose 'classrooms' exactly do they believe English requires 'transforming' due to critical literacy's 'limitations...in terms of its conceptualisation of significant matters such as individual identity, human emotion, and creativity...' (p. x)?

On these terms, to (re)consider the work of Misson and Morgan in the context of the development of a national curriculum is to consider the 'gap' between different levels of the curriculum, specifically the two levels Goodson and Walker (1991, p. xiii) label 'interactive realization', or what takes place in classrooms, and 'preactive definitions'. The impulse here, as I have suggested above, is to pay attention to history and the choices it offers us. The present development of a national curriculum in Australia is preceded by past efforts in this country and elsewhere. In reading about such efforts, I have been particularly struck by Goodson's (1994, p. 41) argument that the national curriculum in England, with its grounding in 'traditional' subjects, gave renewed impetus, after a brief flourishing of teacher-led curriculum expansion in the 1970s and 1980s, to the formalising, abstracting and decontextualising of 'professional knowledge'. Such knowledge was characterised by philosophical and bureaucratic prescription, and superseded 'practical and utilitarian knowledge as the central concern of professionals' (p. 41). Accordingly, the academic philosophising and bureaucratic processes that define 'preactive definitions' of curriculum were accorded precedence over the knowledge made available by the 'interactive realization' that grows out of the complex negotiations which take place between teachers and students in classrooms.

Goodson argues that in such conditions, when 'state and bureaucratic conditions are becoming more and more pervasive', the task ahead of educators is to 'improve our understanding of the politics of curriculum' (p. 119).

Reading Goodson nearly two decades on, it is as if he is writing about Australia in 2008. His is a message that concerned educators in the field of English education have been echoing for some time now (see, for example, contributions to Doecke, Howie & Sawyer, 2006). Misson and Morgan are also evidently aware of the politics of the English curriculum in Australia. They are, of course, active players in these politics – as they acknowledge upfront in their book (see p. ix). They stress that the study of English has experienced a century of disputation, the 'fallout' from which 'has not yet subsided' (p. 5). Yet, in contextualising their position on the relationship between critical literacy and the aesthetic within the (admittedly brief) history of subject contestation in Australia that they provide, Misson and Morgan are oddly silent on the effects of this disputation on teachers. In particular, they have nothing to say about the manner in which those teachers who have aligned themselves with the project of critical literacy have been publicly maligned. On the terms provided by Derrida's thinking on inheritance, this constitutes a *choice* to focus only on the 'preactive definition' of the English curriculum, and to ignore – beyond the level of generalisation – its interactive realization in classrooms. Their choice to focus on the 'preactive definition' is made in response to a stated general uneasiness about critical literacy (p. ix), for which no supporting evidence is provided, and the belief of another academic and 'critical literacy guru' (p. ix) that critical literacy can have no concern with poetry. No doubt such a focus on curriculum (re)definition is a perfectly justifiable orientation, and readily understandable within the contexts of the authors' professional lives and interests, as well as the demands of having an overseas publisher and readership. But such considerations do not preclude the idea that Misson and Morgan have made a decision to respond to the recent history of English in this country, and the histories of English curriculum theorising and research, through a deliberate series of reaffirmations, selections, and interpretations that position them (unwittingly?) *against* teachers and the possibility of the dialogic construction of professional knowledge in classrooms and other professional spaces (cf. Doecke, Homer & Nixon, 2003).

Given that that they do not consider in their book the particular, contextualised demands teachers face in working with critical literacy in classrooms with students, and all that can come of this, it is a rather cruel irony that Mission and Morgan advance *their* critical literacy in the name of opening the English subjects to difference, or 'extend[ing] ourselves by acknowledging other people's ways of seeing the world...[and] a generous acceptance of individual diversity as well as social diversity' (p. 225). For avowed poststructuralists, Misson and Morgan demonstrate a surprising determination to conceive of a 'full presence which is beyond play' (Derrida, 1978, p. 279), or a version of critical literacy which effaces difference. They do not engage with Derrida's (1988) notion of iterability and what this means for the 'interactive realization' of critical literacy in classrooms. It is a general principle of textuality, Derrida (1988) argues, that 'A corruption that is "always possible" cannot be a mere extrinsic accident supervening on a structure that is original and pure, one that can be purged of what thus happens to it' (p. 77). Understood with reference to the Derridean notion of iterability, Misson and Morgan's newly configured critical literacy seems to be projected towards just such a purging of a 'corruption', and so might be understood as an attempt to close-off and re-centre critical literacy. Their 'new' critical literacy is, on its own terms, (re)defined in opposition to the understandings and practices of those teachers who are already implementing something they understand to be critical literacy, which will necessarily be made manifest in classrooms through and as repetition-with-difference. Misson and Morgan appear to want to take critical literacy back to an *originating presence*: a poststructuralism that can deal with aesthetics, and which somewhere, somehow and in some other time existed unsullied by the misunderstandings of secondary English teachers and their clumsy attempts to apply theory in classroom practice. It is hard to reach any other conclusion when a particular example, their use of personification to advance their position, is considered: 'in spite of its uneasiness with aesthetic texts, [critical literacy] has managed to get most things right' (p. 221). There is an obvious haunting presence in such a declaration, as earlier in the book Misson and Morgan informed readers that it is in fact 'some teachers who locate themselves within a sociocultural paradigm' who are 'less comfortable working with ...traditional literary texts, unless they know how to bring to bear a political criticism...' (p. 24). If there is a failing of critical literacy, it is evidently

to be found in teachers and their dogmatism.

For this reason, the 'new' critical literacy advocated by Misson and Morgan strikes me as just another manifestation, albeit in a new and rather unexpected form, of a familiar and conservative trope: the spectral notion of a 'golden age' and its particular work of mourning. This, it has been noted by Gale (2006), is to represent teachers as a 'problem', calling into question whatever autonomy and professional regard they might still enjoy, in order to meet particular political, economic, social or cultural imperatives. There are, of course, alternative understandings of critical literacy to those offered by Misson and Morgan, Turner, Donnelly and Slattery. The teachers giving voice to these understandings, however, do not have the institutional authority of these other individuals. The teacher voice can therefore struggle to cut through and be heard.

It is an honest Ghost, that let me tell you

A sense of possibility of the English subjects being *otherwise* than they have been represented by critics of critical literacy, at least as it is currently understood to be practiced, is evident in the teacher narratives produced as part of a significant national project, 'Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia' (STELLA) (AATE/ALEA, 2002). These provide a window on the 'interactive realization' of English in actual classrooms. A frequent refrain of the STELLA narratives is the complexity of the negotiations taking place between teachers and students, as the affective elements of reading and responding to literary and other texts are brought into a generative relationship with the development and expression of more socially and culturally critical understandings. Van Haren (2002), for example, takes up this theme in relaying her experience of teaching Shakespeare to Year 8 boys. McClenaghan (2002) highlights the creative and critical possibilities for deep personal engagement with language and texts offered by textual interventions, especially those involving the embodied experience of performance. Pidduck (2002) considers the consequences of his students becoming disengaged because of the 'tyranny' of a set text made mandatory by the faculty program he is required to follow, and discusses how he has been forced to recast his own poststructuralist understandings of reading and response in practice. These teachers are clearly committed to promoting authentic engagement for students with what they are reading, and they are not imposing alternative and resistant readings on their students in a doctrinaire manner. The narratives foreground the sort

of classroom negotiations that are integral to teaching and learning in schools, yet often ignored in academic curriculum debates limited to questions of disciplinary integrity (cf. Lucy, 2008).

It would be spoke to

Just as Hamlet is compelled to find a way to speak to his ghost, I am also conscious of an imperative of my own. In developing my position to this point, I cannot, here and now, just(ly) reach a conclusion. To do so would be to subsume the perspectives offered by academics who are critical of critical literacy within an unproductive set of binaries: teacher / academic, secondary classrooms / the academy, practice / theory, authentic / inauthentic. These are the same binaries, now reversed, that I have taken issue with above. The deconstructive reading I have offered of efforts to advance a future English by evoking a spectral critical literacy demands that I also act in response. Lucy's (2004, p. 113) explanation of Hamlet's dilemma strikes a chord here:

... the ghost's presence (whatever it might be) calls up the question of what to do about it, and of what to do about what the incorporeal spectre says about the body politic of Denmark and what must be done about that. In a sense, the more Hamlet faces up to the 'virtual space of spectrality', or the more he tries to think difference differently, the more he becomes aware of his obligation to make a political decision, a decision that has to be made out of respect for his father's memory, the authority of his own position to the role of sovereign-protector, the political interests of his subjects and, of course and above all, out of respect for *justice*.

The present haunting of English and my impulse to deconstruction move me to revisit my past and to re-evaluate my own practice. I must, just as Hamlet did, also speak to a ghost. My interest in justice demands that I say something about how I believe the English subjects should *be*. I owe it to my students, to myself and to all that we experienced in our shared past. This is a task I now understand to have been passed on to me, along with a t-shirt, by my students. My present concern is that a future national English curriculum which ignores critical literacy¹⁰ could make such an exchange impossible. It could, at the very least, devalue my students' gift and all that it can now be said to signify, reframing it as a sentimental remnant of a time of curricula disorder and excessive teacher autonomy. Recalling Derrida's reading of *Hamlet*, particularly the implications of the manner in which Hamlet is called into question by the appearance of the ghostly figure he

takes to be his father, I must undertake my own work of mourning.

The 'transformative model' of programming I have proposed elsewhere (Howie, 2005 & 2006), and which now informs my teaching, has been specifically cast in terms of the subject's past. It directly acknowledges and draws upon the different historical models by and through which the subject has been understood. The model is an attempt to acknowledge my positioning within the subject's history. It is an expression of the debt I, like every English teacher, owe that history for whatever it is I can possibly understand my professional identity and practice to be.

Recast here in explicitly poststructuralist terms, the model can be viewed as setting itself against the impetus to subordination and effacement evident in criticisms currently being made of critical literacy. In other words, the programming model I have proposed is an attempt to 'think difference differently', by not seeing English in terms of 'purity' and 'corruption' (get thee behind me, critical literacy...), as if there is a single *true* version of the subject. At the same time, the model does not hold that anything goes. Instead, it understands that subject identity is preceded by, and is consequently both made possible by and remains dependent upon, a structure of difference that cannot be effaced, no matter how big and bad the spectres are that are called upon to frighten us towards a particular, supposedly more 'correct' vision of English. What Derrida (1997, pp. 144–145) labels supplementarity – a 'cohabitation' of 'significations' that is 'as strange as it is necessary' and which 'adds only to replace'¹¹ – defines the model, giving it an openness, fluidity or indeterminacy that refuses alignment with the entrenched positions of current curriculum debates.

Certainly, this is how others have understood it. In this special issue, Sawyer writes of how the model seems to counter the sort of binaries that I hear in some debates about a future national English curriculum, the supplanting of critical literacy by a renewed focus on aesthetics being *the* example of the moment: 'Howie's (2005) recent model of programming – itself based on MacLachlan and Reid's (1994) work on framing – has provided an interesting and generative way of reading texts in class that enables the production of student texts in ways that are critical, creative or critical-creative.' Sawyer's 'or' and his hyphenation position the model as a spectral third 'presence' in discussions about the past and present of English in this country, carrying as they do the trace of the binary that tends to be established

between critical literacy – as it is understood by its critics to be currently constituted – and the aesthetic. On these grounds, it seems to me to be not *too* excessive to attempt to say something of what this model might offer conversations about a future English curriculum. This is perhaps summed up by ending where I began: with my students, the t-shirt they gave me, and their act of affirmative resistance.

So, what's in a t-shirt? On the basis of the preceding discussion, mine can clearly be seen to hold a significance that implicates it in philosophical and historical discussions relating to the future constitution of English in this country. This otherwise unassuming t-shirt can be seen to signify that my students have internalised the idea that English is about relationships, and it's about practices of reception and creation, or the negotiation and possibilities of meaning from different socio-cultural and historical positions (cf. Frow, 2001). My programming has obviously been significant in assisting them to such understandings in the way that it has brought about a particular set of possibilities for English and how we might relate to each other in our shared context. The notion of programming and its effects is obviously a significant issue at this important time in the history of English in this country. It points back to Goodson and the important lesson he has offered from the experience of implementing a national curriculum in England: the necessity of according significant status to the knowledge produced in the 'interactive realization' of a curriculum.

For this reason, the voices of teachers and students need to be heard while the development of a national curriculum is still in its early stages. These are two constituencies that must be spoken to, in order that they might speak. After all, Hamlet's questions of his ghost (1.4.60) continue to resonate in our disjointed now, as we set about re-conceptualising English in this country: 'Say, why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?' To give teachers, and through them students, a chance to respond when these questions are asked of English is to continue to think about the possibilities of being and non-being for the English subjects. It is to ask what might be believed about English and English teaching, and what might not; in other words, it is to envisage a possible future for English characterised by the democratic possibilities of difference and diversity. I hold onto the hope that educational policy makers in this country might yet make policy 'respond to the educational potential of practice' (Goodson & Walker, 1991, p. 1), moving it beyond abstracted curriculum

philosophising. To do so will position classroom interaction at the centre of the development of the national curriculum when the process might otherwise remain driven by party political and bureaucratic imperatives, as Goodson and Walker lament was the case in England two decades ago.

Notes

- 1 Hamlet: 'The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right ...' (Shakespeare, 1985/2001, 1.5.189). Derrida draws on these lines in the prefacing quotation to *Specters of Marx*.
- 2 Derrida (1988, p. 12) calls this structure of repetition-with-difference *iterability*: 'Every sign ... can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every give context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable ... This citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident or an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called "normal".'
- 3 Bakhtin (1986, p. 69): '... all real and integral understanding is actively responsive, and constitutes nothing other than the initial preparatory stage of a response (in whatever form it may be actualized). And the speaker himself is orientated precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding.'
- 4 'Meaning is achieved through responding and composing, which are typically interdependent and ongoing processes' (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 7).
- 5 Turner (2008), for example, conflates the traditional, literature-centred discipline of English with such things as media, cultural and film studies, seeing them as 'associated disciplines' and united in their pursuit of a common goal: inculcating 'imaginative, moral, [and] ethical experiences' for students. It is as if the disciplinary contestation of the 1980s and 1990s that led Frow (1990, pp. 360–361) to write of 'productively conflictual chaos', and to suggest that 'The scope of the discipline of English has thus become more like that of a generalized rhetoric, or a general field of textual studies...no longer restricted to the study of high culture and to apparently universal aesthetic values ...', never took place. In fact, contrary to Turner's description of 'associated disciplines', Frow (p. 359) suggested in 1990 that the discipline of English, unlike the school subject English, 'has rarely taken seriously the realities of its role in ethical regulation'. Frow does, however, appear to have come around to Turner's way of thinking, seeing a new settlement for the discipline of English and its 'associates' as a result of the development of a national curriculum. Like Turner, Frow has also publicly condemned the appointment of Freebody by the National Curriculum Board on the grounds that he is not an English or literature studies specialist (see Whitlock, Dixon, Frow & Coleman, 2008), suggesting that this new settlement for English can only come at the expense of critical literacy.

- 6 I have in mind here the sort of work that teachers have written about in AATE Interface publications edited by Doecke, Homer & Nixon (2003), Doecke & Parr (2005), and Doecke, Howie & Sawyer (2006). To the extent that I had deliberately programmed a unit of work for my students which drew on critical theory, taking a socially and culturally critical approach to language and text and exploring questions of ideology and effects of power in communicative acts, I would locate my teaching of the aforementioned elective within the broad project of critical literacy.
- 7 Others include grammar, phonics, the Western canon and whatever else supposedly no longer gets taught in English. These are spectres evoked by commentators to give form to a possible national English curriculum, precisely because they allow them to define what should (and should not) be in it (e.g. Donnelly, 2008).
- 8 Lucy (2008) addresses the tensions and paradoxes within Turner's position, particularly considering his prominent institutional role within the field of cultural studies, a field of academic inquiry that has, ironically enough, had quite a deal to do with the redefining of English as a discipline in our universities and schools.
- 9 In this special issue Sawyer discusses the work of Misson and Morgan in precisely these terms.
- 10 Slattery (2008b) has suggested that the absence of the term 'critical literacy' from the framing paper for English is a considerable concession to its opponents on the part of the NCB, and a repudiation of its value and influence.
- 11 Lucy (1997, p. 118) explains supplementarity as 'recurring process of exchange' functioning as 'both an addition and a substitution'.

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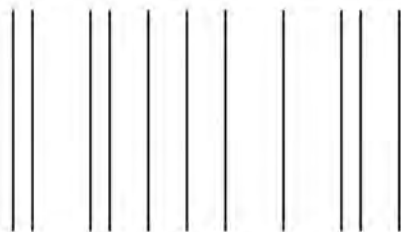
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